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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001153

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHRISTIAN PASTOR RECOUNTS JUNE ATTACK

REF: COLOMBO 921

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SUMMARY

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1. (U) Poloffs and POL FSN traveled to Ambalangoda in Galle district on June 28 to follow up a reported attack on an Assembly of God property on June 5 and 6. Pastor Yogesh Mudalige of the Assembly of God church complained that police, despite being made aware of the June 5 attack, failed to prevent the June 6 attack, or to offer adequate protection to the pastor and his family from the attackers. As of the date of poloffs' visit to Ambalangoda, the pastor was unable to safely occupy or use the new property. The June 5-6 attack is one of several dozen against Christian organizations that have occurred over the past year. Although several arrests were made in this particular case, general police reluctance to pursue such cases helps foster an atmosphere of impunity for the perpetrators of such attacks. END SUMMARY.

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ATTACK ON THE AOG

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2. (U) On June 28, poloffs and POL FSN visited Pastor Yogesh Mudalige and his brother Suresh, of the Assembly of God (AOG) church at their residence in Ambalangoda in Galle district. Pastor Yogesh's current residence also serves as the location for AOG church services, where the typical congregation size is approximately 100 persons. Pastor Yogesh's new property, which was to serve as a personal residence and a non-religious community center, incorporating both a preschool and computer training center, was attacked on June 5 and 6 by local villagers.

3. (U) According to Yogesh, on the evening of June 5--three days after he acquired the property--some villagers began throwing bottles at the house. The pastor informed the police and although the police allowed him to file a complaint, they did not immediately investigate the disturbance.

4. (U) On the morning of June 6, the pastor and his brother were installing a bathroom in the new property when a crowd of approximately 30 approached them and began an argument. The villagers reportedly warned the pastor not to build a church on the new property and attacked the house, breaking the windows and tearing down the fence. (Comment: While no monks were present during the attacks, the pastor and his brother allege that the attack was planned at the local Buddhist temple and that the local head monk was responsible for instigating the mob. End Comment.) The mob grew larger and assaulted the pastor, his brother, and the assistant pastor Suresh Pereira, causing all three men to seek medical attention for their injuries.

5. (U) The pastor's brother told poloffs that while they were being assaulted, members of the mob attempted to strip Pastor Yogesh, and in the process stole his wallet, which contained SLR 27,000 (\$270), his mobile phone, and another SLR 200,000 (\$2,000) from the pastor's vehicle--funds donated to the pastor by U.S. based Mercy Works for the new property. By the time the police arrived on the scene, the three men had already been taken to the hospital. The pastor told poloffs that they were released from the hospital the next day, despite having continued difficulty walking. The pastor filed another formal case against the mob, naming 19 of his attackers for the police.

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POLICE ON THE SCENE

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6. (U) During a June 28 meeting, Inspector M.C. Herath of the Ambalangoda police department told poloffs that the pastor and his brother identified only six of their attackers. On June 7, the Ambalangoda police arrested those 6, all of whom were later released on bail. Herath told poloffs that during the arrest, a mob of 80-100, some of whom were members of the local provincial council, urged him not to arrest anyone. Herath also told poloffs that when he went to visit the new property he found pro-Buddhist slogans

written on the door, such as "Buddhism is the true religion," damage to the fence and windows, and a Buddha statue, a sacred Bo tree sapling, and lamps scattered throughout the property. (Comment: Poloffs confirmed the damage and graffiti at the new property. End Comment.) The pastor told poloffs he had to call higher authorities in Colombo in order to get the Ambalangoda police to remove the statue, the sapling, and the lamps from the grounds. A hearing on the case is scheduled for November 28. (Comment: Hearings are typically scheduled closer to the date of the incident. That the hearing is scheduled almost six months from the date of the crime could suggest some undue influence on behalf of the suspected attackers. End Comment.)

17. (U) While the pastor continues to hold church services at his home without disturbance, both Inspector Herath and the pastor told poloffs it was currently unsafe to return to the new property. Inspector Herath and the pastor are attempting to organize an interfaith meeting, which would include the other Christian pastors from the district, members of the Buddhist community, and the police, so that the grievances of all parties can be heard, and so that Pastor Yogesh can safely return to the newly-purchased property.

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COMMENT  
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18. (U) This attack is one of several dozen against Christian organizations that have occurred in Sri Lanka over the past year. (Reftel describes a May attack in the same district). While police made several arrests in this particular case, general police unwillingness to pursue these cases helps create an atmosphere of impunity for the perpetrators of these acts. If the proposed meeting between the Buddhists in the village and the Christian pastors occurs, it could help to clear the air between the two communities in the village, so that both can coexist without fear of "unethical" conversion or persecution. We will continue to monitor the progress of this case. END COMMENT.  
LUNSTEAD